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Oregon Public Health officials release health assessment for recreational use of Portland Harbor

Recreational use of the Portland Harbor does not pose a health risk; eating certain fish continues to be a health threat

A new assessment shows that while eating certain types of fish from the Portland Harbor area continues to be a serious health threat, the recreational use of the Willamette River does not pose a health risk.

Oregon Public Health released a health assessment today that reviews data from hundreds of environmental samples collected from water, fish, soil, and river bottom sediment in the Portland Harbor Superfund Site study area. These data were used to assess the health risks for people who use the harbor area recreationally. Under federal law, the Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP) is required to assess and report on health risks associated with superfund sites.

The main chemicals found in the harbor that accumulate over time in fish tissue are Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), which last a long time in the river sediment.

The fish that are likely to pose a health risk include what are called “resident fish” because they live their entire lives in the harbor and do not migrate out to the ocean or other waters. Resident fish include bass, carp, and catfish but not salmon, steelhead or lamprey. In a future study, EHAP will assess Willamette River clams to determine if they are safe to eat.

“We continue to recommend that people do not eat certain fish from the Portland Harbor,” said David Farrer, Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP) toxicologist. “However, from our analysis, the levels of chemicals found in the water, dirt and sediment are not high enough to pose a health risk for recreational users, including children. People do need to be aware there may be a risk for bacteria-related illness if river water is

accidentally swallowed, and we recommend washing with soap and water after boating or swimming,”

The harbor is the section of the Willamette River extending north from the Freemont Bridge to the southern tip of Sauvie Island. It was designated a Superfund site in 2000 due to decades of heavy industrial use.

For people who fish for food in this section of the Willamette, health officials advise choosing smaller, younger fish in general and migratory species such as salmon and steelhead. Because PCBs accumulate in fatty tissue, proper preparation and cooking methods are important. Ways to reduce exposure to PCBs include cutting off the skin and fatty parts, throwing away the head and guts, and cooking the fish so that fat drips off the meat. Also, stay informed by knowing and following local fish advisories by checking: www.healthoregon.org/fishadv

It is especially important for women, children, the elderly, and people with compromised immune systems to follow the above recommendations. Pregnant women, nursing infants and young children are especially sensitive to the health effects of PCBs.

Public health officials want to remind people that there are currently other health concerns with the Willamette River, in addition to chemical pollution. One such issue is bacterial contamination, which potentially could cause bacteria-related illnesses if swimming near a combined sewage overflow area after heavy rainfall. Another is the potential for unseen objects underwater which could cause injuries to people diving or swimming, especially near the shore.

Controlling sewage overflow is an important part of Portland’s efforts to improve the Willamette River water quality. The city of Portland has been working on this effort since 1991. By 2011, sewage will only overflow into the Willamette on average four times a year instead of every time it rains.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and several responsible parties are working together on how to control sources of contamination to the Harbor. The EPA anticipates completing the draft Feasibility Study Report by the end of 2010. That report will analyze several cleanup alternatives and be followed by a Proposed Plan, a public comment opportunity, and a final cleanup decision

for the site. Once contaminated sediments are removed, the PCB concentrations in fish will gradually decrease over time.

Public health officials lifted an advisory against the commercial harvesting of crayfish within a radius of 1000 feet of the Northern Railroad Bridge on the Willamette River, the former McCormick and Baxter site near the St. John's area in Portland. The lifting of this advisory in February, 2010 was prompted by a clean-up action that occurred in 2005.

To read the full report, please visit: www.healthoregon.org/ehap.

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